

Singled Out

The nondescript, battleship-gray government sedan parked in an open spot on the street directly across from the home of Petty Officer Second Class Albert Jackson Heller. It was the keystone of seven row houses in a working-class neighborhood in Riverton, Pennsylvania. The only markings on the car—in black—were the words “U.S. Navy” above a serial number on the front doors. A Navy chief petty officer and a petty officer first class, both in their service dress blues, exited their vehicle and walked across the street. The chief looked at the envelope he held to confirm the address.

A neighbor two doors up got out of his rocking chair, stepped off his porch, and walked toward the sailors. He asked, “May I help you, Chief?”

The chief gazed warily at the fiftyish stranger who was dressed in clean but worn jeans, work boots, and a heavy v-neck sweater worn over a spotless white t-shirt. Although a cloudless day with a bright, mid-afternoon sun in early April, there was still a chill in the air. It was a reminder that spring was still young, and winter didn’t want to be forgotten quite yet. “Yes, sir,” the chief answered. “We’re looking for Mr. or Mrs. Lawrence Heller. Is this their house?”

“It is, but they’re not home. May I ask what this is about?”

“I’m sorry, sir, but it’s a private matter. Where can we find them?”

The neighbor, who had fought in World War II and knew Albert Jackson Heller was serving with the Navy in Vietnam, surmised the nature of the “private matter.” He also knew of the relationship Petty Officer Heller had with his mother. “Mrs. Heller is at her store about a mile from here, but you would be better off delivering that telegram to Mr. Heller.”

The chief didn't acknowledge what he was holding, nor did he question the neighbor's advice. "Then where can we find Mr. Heller?"

"He works at the main post office downtown. Do you know where it is?"

"I do," responded the first class. "I grew up in the city." He looked at the chief, who was not from the area, and said, "It's about a fifteen-minute drive from here. If you want, Chief, I'll drive." The chief handed over the car keys and said, "It's all yours, Petty Officer. I'll ride shotgun."

The chief turned toward the neighbor and said, "Thanks for the information ... and the advice. I'm sure you have your reasons." The neighbor nodded. The chief then asked, "How did you know my rank, sir?"

"I served aboard the *Intrepid* in World War II. Came out as a third class boatswain mate. Survived three kamikaze attacks. The second and the third were on the same day. Hell of a thing. It was from that third attack that I was wounded from shrapnel and suffered second- and third-degree burns over about half of my body. That sent me home. My folks got a telegram like the one you're holding. Others got theirs delivered by an officer and a chaplain. Neither of you is an officer or a chaplain, so I'm assuming Jaks was wounded and ain't dead."

"Like I said, sir, it's a private matter," the chief responded with a stoic expression. He tipped his cap and said, "Thank you for your service. You guys went through hell."

The chief and the first class walked across the street to their waiting car. The first class drove.

Several hundred miles to the south, another nondescript, battleship-gray government sedan parked on a Baltimore street, in a predominantly black neighborhood, in front of the well-kept single home of Chief Petty Officer Whitney S. McCrea. A twentysomething line officer and an older chaplain—a Catholic priest—both lieutenants, left their sedan, walked up to the front door, and rang the doorbell. A black teen, about fifteen years old, dressed neatly in a button-down collar, pale blue shirt with tan khaki pants, answered the door. His heart sank, and he found it difficult to speak, but he managed to ask, “May I help you?”

“Yes, son,” said the lieutenant, and he made the introductions. “Is this the home of Alma McCrea?”

“It is. But what do you want with her?”

Without answering his question, the chaplain asked, “Are you related to Mrs. McCrea?”

“I’m her oldest son.”

“Then you must be Thomas,” stated the chaplain with a genuinely warm smile, shaking Thomas’ hand. He then asked, “Is your mother home?”

“Yes, sir. She’s in the backyard gardening. But what do you want with her? Is she in trouble? Is my father in trouble?”

Thomas’ last question caught the young lieutenant off guard, and he gave out a noticeable sigh. “No, Thomas,” said the lieutenant with the faintest of smiles. “No one is in trouble. But we must speak with your mother. May we come in?”

“Yes, please. I’m ... I’m sorry.”

The two officers removed their hats as they entered the house. Thomas showed the men to a sofa in the living room and said, "I'll get my mother."

The officers remained standing as Thomas vanished to the kitchen, which exited to the back of the house. They heard a muffled conversation through the back screen door, and then they saw both Alma McCrea and Thomas enter. Thomas reentered the living room. "My mother will be with you in a minute. She just needs to clean up. I'll be right back. I need to get some sweet tea for you gentlemen."

"That won't be necessary, Thomas," said the lieutenant.

Thomas responded without hesitation and without a smile, "But my mother insists, and you don't want to argue with my mother when she insists." Once again, Thomas headed toward the kitchen. Before Thomas came back, Alma knelt and said a silent prayer.

Alma and Thomas entered the living room together. She was wearing jeans, a pair of white tennis sneakers stained brown from the garden dirt, and an untucked, faded, short-sleeved, denim Navy-enlisted work shirt with petty officer first class chevrons on the left sleeve. Now in her mid-thirties, she stood at relaxed attention with her hands folded over each other in front of her five-foot-three body. Even though she had been working in what she called her "Victory Garden," Alma McCrea looked as clean as if she had just stepped out of a shower.

Alma watched the lieutenant glance at a large, framed family portrait that hung above the fireplace mantel. Chief Whitney McCrea—in full dress uniform—and Alma McCrea stood behind their three children. "I see you noticed the portrait, Lieutenant."

"Yes, Ma'am. May I ask when it was taken?"

“It was about nine months ago, just before he left for ’Nam.” A warm smile crossed Alma’s face as she looked at the picture. “Whitney had made Chief about a month before. He was so proud that he even splurged and had the portrait done in color. When he joined the Navy almost seventeen years ago, he promised me he would make Chief before he retired in twenty years. He kept his promise. He always did.”

The smile left her face as she turned toward the lieutenant. “I didn’t want him to go,” she said. “For the sake of the children, I wanted him to take the recruiter position the Navy offered him right here in Baltimore. But Whitney firmly believed it was his solemn duty to serve in combat. Said he would be of more use over there than sitting behind a desk here. He also promised me this would be his last tour.” Alma McCrea stared into the void. Her voice cracked as she affirmed, “And Whitney always kept his promises.”

Thomas set the tray holding a pitcher of sweet tea and four tall glasses filled with ice on the coffee table located directly in front of the sofa. Alma addressed the officers in full Southern hospitality mode.

“Please, gentlemen, sit,” she said, motioning with her hand. She turned toward her son. “Thomas, would you please pour the tea? And remember to serve our guests first.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Thomas answered dutifully.

The lieutenant and the chaplain waited in uncomfortable silence until the tea was poured and Alma seated herself in a comfortable armchair facing the officers, who then sat down. Thomas gave each of the officers and his mother a glass before he took his own. Then he asked, “Do you want me to leave, Mother?”

Alma reached out and gently held her son’s right hand and said, “No, Thomas. Please stay.” She motioned for him to sit in the matching armchair to her left.

The priest asked, “When will your other two children be home, Mrs. McCrea?”

“In about an hour or so. Thomas’ school had early dismissal, which is why he’s home.”

“Do you want us to wait for them, or perhaps come back when your family is gathered together?”

“No!” she snapped. “They’re too young.” Alma paused, then said, “So is Thomas, but he’s stronger.”

Before either officer could speak again, she asked in a polite but melancholy tone, “May I read the telegram you’re holding?”

The officers gave each other a side glance and a quick nod. The lieutenant answered, “Yes, Ma’am.” He stood, walked around the coffee table to where Alma McCrea was sitting, and handed her the telegram.

The main post office in Riverton was built in 1940 during the New Deal in the style of most federal buildings of the time—large, square, and made of granite. The Navy sedan was parked in the rear of the building, where the loading docks were located, in a space reserved for government vehicles. The two sailors climbed the steps to the loading platform and were greeted by a postal worker heaving bags of mail into a large, straight-body truck.

The worker, in his early thirties, stopped, wiped his brow with a handkerchief he pulled out of the back pocket of his jeans, and asked, “May I help you, gentlemen?”

“Where can we find Mr. Lawrence Heller?” asked the chief.

“May I ask who’s looking for him?”

“We’re from the Department of the Navy,” stated the chief, but offered no further introduction. “Is Mr. Heller here?”

“Yeah, he’s here. Please wait and I’ll get him.”

The worker proceeded into the bowels of the loading area until he reached a small office located behind large metal containers and cages holding bags of mail and parcels. The worker knocked on the door, entered, and informed Larry Heller of the two sailors waiting to see him.

Larry slowly raised his six-foot-two frame from the chair and stood motionless at attention. He was in his early fifties, like many of the men he supervised. His fair complexion, full head of wavy red hair, and fiery red handlebar mustache were accented by his blue eyes. The man had presence. Even though he had been discharged from the Army almost twenty-five years earlier, he still had a military bearing and looked as though he had just returned from boot camp. Most of the men who worked with him were vets from World War II or Korea, and a few from Vietnam.

“Thanks, John,” Larry Heller said to the worker. “Please tell them I’ll be out in a moment.”

When John left, Larry Heller picked up the only photo he had of his son, Jaks, taken in Vietnam aboard his river patrol boat, and looked at it intently. Although Petty Officer Heller landed in Vietnam eight months ago, it had been almost a year since Larry Heller had last seen his son or heard his voice.

As he walked to the loading dock to meet the two sailors, Larry felt his stomach turn into a knot, and he desperately fought off his worst fears for what they were about to tell him. His breathing became rapid, he started sweating, and he thought his pounding

heart would burst through his chest. *I've been through worse*, he kept telling himself.

Larry Heller wanted to believe that. He needed to believe that. *I grew up on the streets of South Chicago with my brothers and sister, without parents, during the Depression. I landed on Omaha Beach on D-Day in the first wave and came off without a scratch. I made it across France, wounded three times. The last one put me in a hospital for almost a year and nearly cost me my leg, but I'm still here and standing.*

Then his thoughts turned away from himself. *How do I tell Gertrude? How will she handle it? She received three telegrams while I served and she almost fell apart then—and I was only wounded. Will this put her over the edge?*

At that moment, Larry Heller had an irreverent thought: *Why should I care how Gertrude takes this news? This is the same mother who, because of Jaks' constant run-ins with the law, couldn't wait for him to leave home.*

He then turned his thoughts back to himself. *How will I live without Jaks?*

As he approached the waiting chief and first class, Larry saw about a half dozen of his coworkers milling near the sailors. One of his closest friends, who also served with Patton's Third Army, stopped him just short of the group. His friend put his hand on Larry's shoulder and said, "I'm here for you, Larry. We're all here for you. Whatever it is, we'll get through it, I promise. Now let's go see what these two guys want ... together. Okay, soldier?"

"Got it, Paul. You know I would do the same for you, right?"

"I know you would, Larry. We all know."

Larry Heller drew a deep breath as he met the chief and the first class. He stood erect, reached out, shook their hands, and said, "I'm Larry Heller. I understand you want to see me."

The chief made the introductions: "Mr. Heller, we have a telegram concerning your son, Petty Officer Second Class Albert Jackson Heller." He handed him an envelope.

"You're mistaken. My son is only a third class."

"I can explain, Mr. Heller, after you've read the telegram."

Larry Heller held the envelope with both hands, fixated on it. Larry reluctantly asked, "Do you know what it says?"

The chief responded. "Yes, sir. I'm sorry, but *you* need to read it."

Larry Heller's hands began to shake; he felt himself paralyzed with abject fear. *My God. I'm scared shitless! I can't move. What the hell is happening to me?*

Paul responded quickly, putting himself between the sailors and Larry, looking directly into his friend's eyes. "Larry, I'll read it to you if you want me to." Larry Heller didn't respond. Paul asked again more forcefully, "Larry. Do you want me to read it to you?"

Larry nodded and handed the envelope to Paul. Paul gingerly opened the envelope, took out the telegram, and read it just loud enough for Larry to hear:

"To Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence Heller: The Secretary of Defense and the Secretary of the Navy regret to inform you that your son, Petty Officer Second Class Albert Jackson Heller, was seriously wounded in action on 4

April 1970 while on a mission critical to the conflict in the Republic of Vietnam. He has been transferred to a military hospital in Saigon, Vietnam for further care and treatment. Your son's condition is critical. We will give your son the best care we can provide. Our thoughts and prayers are with your son and your family. Respectfully yours..."

Paul looked up, with tears streaming down his face, and said, "He's alive, Larry. "He's fucking alive." They embraced. Larry Heller sobbed in heaves.

After a few minutes, both men collected themselves. Larry turned toward the group, which had by now tripled in size, and announced, "Jaks has been seriously wounded and is recovering in a Saigon hospital. But he's alive."

"Thank God" could be heard from many of the workers as they wiped their eyes. Everyone came over to Larry Heller to shake his hand and hug him as if he just scored the winning touchdown for the home team.

Larry thanked everyone for their support, especially Paul, who smiled and nodded. Then, to lighten the moment, Heller barked, "Why the hell are all of you still here? We have mail to move. Get to it!" The crowd nervously laughed and dispersed.

Larry walked over to the chief and first class and again shook their hands. "Christ. You knew what was in the telegram," he stated. "Why couldn't you just tell me instead of making me go through this agony?"

"Because we aren't allowed to, Mr. Heller. Unless you had given us explicit permission, we weren't allowed to divulge the contents of the telegram. We're sorry, but

those are the rules, and we have to follow the procedures. Excuse my language, sir, but it's pretty fucked up."

"No shit," Larry Heller responded. "We had a saying for that in World War II—FUBAR: Fucked Up Beyond All Recognition."

The chief and first class quietly laughed, and the chief said sheepishly, "Not much has changed, Mr. Heller." The chief continued, "I hope you understand and will forgive us."

Impulsively, Larry Heller hugged both sailors. He then asked, "When did Jaks become a second class?"

"That was awarded to him by his squadron commander in the Saigon hospital."

Larry didn't respond, but thought, *Some consolation prize*. He became more somber. "Was Jaks wounded while on his patrol boat? What happened to the rest of his crew?"

Both the chief and first class briefly lowered their eyes and clenched their lips together. "I'm sorry, Mr. Heller, but we're not allowed to divulge any further information," said the chief. "But here's my card. You call me at anytime, day or night, and I'll give you whatever information I know about your son's condition. I promise."

"Thank you, Chief. Much appreciated."

Larry Heller, however, caught the chief's and first class's looks. He had his answer on the fate of his son's crew. Larry knew that more telegrams would be delivered, and there would be no celebrations.

Alma McCrea continued to stare at the envelope containing the telegram until Thomas asked, “Mother. You’re scaring me. Do you want me to read it to you?”

Alma looked over at her anxious son and saw the concern on his face. She answered in a quiet, soothing tone, “No, Thomas. I’ll read it, although I already know what it’s going to say.” She looked at the lieutenant and the chaplain and stated matter-of-factly, “And so do you gentlemen.”

She again turned toward Thomas. “Besides, this is my responsibility, not yours. You have time enough to experience your own hardships and heartaches.” She opened the envelope and removed the telegram.

Thomas asked, “May I read it, too, Mother?”

“I’ll read it aloud so that all of us can hear it.” She began:

“To Mrs. Whitney S. McCrea: The Secretary of Defense and the Secretary of the Navy regret to inform you that your husband, Chief Petty Officer Whitney S. McCrea, was killed in action on 4 April 1970 while on a mission critical to the conflict in the Republic of Vietnam. We regret having to inform you that we were unable to recover your husband’s remains. Our thoughts and prayers are with you and your family.
Respectfully, and with sympathy, yours...”

Alma’s voice never wavered as she read the telegram. Thomas got out of his chair and knelt in front of his mother, gently holding her hands as he buried his head in her lap.

Alma McCrea slowly released Thomas' hands, stroked her son's tearstained face and kissed him on the forehead.

She looked up and asked the lieutenant flatly, "Where is my husband's body? We can't bury him or mourn over him without a body." *All of my life with Whitney I've been preparing for this moment. I'm not ready. God help me. I'm not ready.* Alma's body shook uncontrollably, and she erupted, "WHERE THE HELL IS WHITNEY'S BODY?"

The lieutenant was startled, and his entire body twitched. The priest rose from the sofa. Alma lashed out. "You sit your ass down, Father. I want answers, and I believe the Lieutenant has them."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. McCrea," answered the lieutenant, "but I'm not allowed to divulge what little information I have. And believe me, I have precious little information."

Alma McCrea shouted, "Then I want to know what little information you have, Lieutenant. I deserve it. Thomas and his brother and sister deserve it. My husband and I have earned it. He's been fighting all of his life. If it wasn't the rednecks right here in Baltimore, then it was the bigotry in the United States Navy. But yet ... but yet, he so loved his country that he felt it his duty to take on the Viet Cong. Not once. Not twice. But three times. And he died doing it! Did he ever complain, Lieutenant? Father? The answer is no. He just did his job and never once asked for a 'thank you.' What more could you possibly want from any one person? So you better well speak up, Lieutenant!"

"Mother. Please," pleaded Thomas, still kneeling in front of her. "This isn't helping. It won't bring him back. Please, Mother?"

"He was killed on a classified mission," the lieutenant unexpectedly stated.

“Go on,” Alma McCrea angrily demanded.

The lieutenant nervously recounted: “Three boats were sent to retrieve some non-military operators. Your husband’s boat was on point. About fifteen minutes from the rendezvous point, your husband’s boat was hit by several rocket-propelled grenades. His boat was ...” the lieutenant searched for the right word “... vaporized.” Once again, he paused and then continued, “The number two boat completed the extraction while the third boat stayed and looked for survivors.”

Alma McCrea let out a deep sigh, closed her eyes for a moment, and composed herself. She asked, “Why his boat, Lieutenant? Why were they singled out?”

“We know that there was a bounty on his boat because your husband’s crew was very effective at stopping contraband. We believe it was retaliation. They, and we don’t know who the ‘they’ were, wanted to make a point. We don’t believe they actually knew the true nature of the mission. Your husband and two other members of his crew paid the price.”

Alma asked quizzically, “You said two others. There was a crew of four. What happened to the fourth member of the crew?”

“The third boat found him barely alive along the river bank. He was evacuated by helicopter to a field hospital and was eventually moved to the main military hospital in Saigon over the course of about a week. He’s in critical condition. That’s all I know about what happened, Mrs. McCrea.”

“Who was the survivor, please?” Alma asked with concern.

The lieutenant’s hand shook as he took a long sip of his sweet tea and glanced at some notes on a small pad of paper. “Petty Officer Second Class Albert Jackson Heller.

Heller was the forward turret gunner and a third class at the time of the attack. He was awarded second class at the hospital in Saigon. Apparently he was blown clear. We still don't understand how he survived."

Alma McCrea looked down at her young son and said, "Thomas, please go and sit in your chair. I'll be all right." Silently, Thomas got up and moved.

She took a deep breath and said, "I know of Petty Officer Heller. Whitney sometimes spoke of him in his letters to me. He said Heller reminded him of how he was at that age—impulsive, intense, and naïve. But he was good at his job. Whitney even said Petty Officer Heller could be a rock head." She chuckled to herself, smiled, and then said, "I always laughed when he referred to Heller as a rock head. Now that was the pot calling the kettle black."

The smile slipped away as she continued. "My husband was the forward gunner and a third class on his first tour, just like Petty Officer Heller. By the time he went on his second tour, he had made first class and became captain of his own patrol boat. He could have taken a desk job on his third tour but chose to skipper a boat. Whitney always told me it was his job to keep those young men alive, even if it meant it could cost him his."

Alma McCrea wiped the mist from her eyes with her forearm and then stood erect. The two officers also stood, as did Thomas. "I appreciate and thank you, Lieutenant, for your candor. I know that you weren't supposed to tell me, and I also know how difficult it was for you to do so. Know that as far as Thomas and I are concerned, that conversation never happened."

She walked to the officers and shook their hands. “Now, if you gentlemen will excuse me, I have dinner to prepare as my other two children will be home shortly.

Thomas will show you out.”

The two officers returned to their car and sat for a moment. The priest spoke first and said, “You did the right thing explaining how her husband died.”

The lieutenant turned toward the priest with a worried expression on his face. “Don’t worry,” the priest said in an attempt to put the lieutenant at ease. “Mrs. McCrea won’t say a word, and neither will I. In fact, I’m sure she was grateful for the explanation. I’ve been through this more times than I care to remember, Lieutenant. In a perverse way, it probably comforted her in that it brought some measure of closure.”

The lieutenant, who had never served in combat, said, “I really hate this job.”

The priest, who had served two tours in Vietnam as a chaplain with forward-based Marine units, didn’t immediately respond. Instead, he opened his window, took out a pack of cigarettes and a Zippo from his coat pocket, shook out a cigarette, and lit it. The priest took a long drag, and then exhaled a billow of smoke.

Surprised, the lieutenant said, “I didn’t know you smoked, Father.”

The priest looked at the young lieutenant and replied, “There’s a lot you don’t know about me, and a great deal you have to learn about your *job*.”

“Such as?”

“Well, it may be just a job for you—and a temporary assignment at that, but there’s nothing temporary about the loss the McCreas and others like them suffer. Their loss is for the rest of their lives.”

He then looked straight ahead; took another drag, exhaled, lamenting, “I’ve held dying men in my arms and ministered last rites to them. I loved those boys. I’ve felt their loved ones’ loss, and it still breaks my heart when I think about them ... all of them. But it’s different, very different, when it’s one of your own. We should get down on our knees and pray every day that we will never experience the misery they have.”

The priest took one last drag on the cigarette and flicked it through the open window. There was a momentary lapse before he proclaimed, “God, I hate this fucking war.”

Later that night after dinner when the dishes were cleaned and put away, Alma McCrea explained to her two youngest children what had happened to their father. Thomas was at her side.

When all three of her children were finally asleep, she walked out the back door into her “Victory Garden.” Alma McCrea fell to her knees, threw back her head, and released a primordial scream of anguish.

Petty Officer Second Class Albert Jackson Heller was eventually moved to the main military hospital at Pearl Harbor. He was told by his doctors that he probably would not walk again or, at best, would need crutches for the rest of his life. His father wrote to him almost daily, called at least once a week, and even made two trips to see him.

But Petty Officer Heller was more resilient than even his father thought, and almost five months to the day after being admitted to the hospital, he passed the physical to be cleared for sea duty aboard submarines—his original destination before he had volunteered for combat duty in Vietnam.

He served a total of seven years in the Navy—five of those years aboard a Fast Attack submarine out of Pearl. Albert Jackson Heller came home only twice in those five years: once after he was discharged from the hospital, and the other when he got married.

Although he had written to the families of the other crew members, the only one to respond and keep up the correspondence was Alma McCrea. But it wasn't until he was discharged from the Navy, a little over five years after being wounded, that he thought about seeing her.

About a year later, Jaks Heller called Alma McCrea and asked if he could visit her and pay his respects to her husband, his former captain, Chief Petty Officer Whitney McCrea. She agreed.

The journey took Jaks Heller over three hours. When he arrived, Alma introduced him to her children. Thomas was now a sophomore in college. Her younger son, Jacob, was a senior in high school, and her daughter, Sarah—the youngest—was just starting high school.

Alma McCrea and Albert Jackson Heller then visited Whitney McCrea's gravesite—without the children. She said, "I only come here once a year, on the anniversary of Whitney's death, because I've never gotten over not having a body to mourn. The empty casket funeral was almost too much for the children and me to bear."

They returned to her home for tea and a light lunch. The same portrait that hung over the fireplace mantel when Alma McCrea received her telegram was still there. It now resided above a folded flag in a wood, glass-enclosed frame. Jaks asked the same question as the lieutenant had, and Alma gave virtually the same answer.

Alma and Thomas shared with Jaks the telegram and the visit from the two naval officers. Jaks described what he knew about how his parents—but mostly how his father—reacted when they received their telegram on that same day.

Heller also spoke of how he felt about Whitney McCrea and—reluctantly—about some of their experiences in Vietnam. Although it was only a bit over six years before, it now seemed as he told those stories that they happened in another lifetime.

Alma shared how her husband held then-Petty Officer Third Class Albert Jackson Heller in high regard. Jaks mused with a quiet laugh, “You wouldn’t have known that if you’d heard how he was constantly on my ass!” Embarrassed, Heller immediately said, “My apologies, Mrs. McCrea. Sometimes I forget myself.”

Alma McCrea smiled. “It’s okay. I’ve heard it all before.”

Jaks Heller continued, “But thank you for telling me that. I always wanted his approval, and I was never sure if what I was doing was good enough.”

Jaks’ eyes welled up with tears. He then confessed, “I still blame myself for what happened that day. I’m so sorry, Mrs. McCrea. Perhaps had I done a better job, maybe they... ”

Alma reached out and squeezed Jaks’ hands. “You need to believe that Whitney had good reason to trust you with his life, Jaks. You mustn’t blame yourself for what happened. Ever. He was there because he wanted to be there. He knew the risks and the dangers. Whitney always preached that in war, you do the best you can with the right attitude, and whatever happens next is in God’s hands.”

“Funny,” Jaks said as he brushed away the tears. “He told me the exact same thing the first day I arrived aboard the boat.”

“Then you need to believe that. You’re alive for a reason. You need to believe that, too, and forgive yourself. If Whitney were here, he’d tell you the same thing.”

But Albert Jackson Heller did not believe it, nor did he forgive himself. Over the next five years, on the anniversary of Whitney McCrea’s death, Heller would make a pilgrimage to the gravesite. He would get out of his car; pay his respects, and immediately head home, never notifying Alma McCrea of his intentions to visit. He didn’t want to intrude in her life.

About seven years after his first visit with Alma, Jaks again called and asked if he could visit her. She graciously agreed. But when Heller arrived and knocked on her door, it was Thomas who answered like he had done so many years before.

He invited Heller in. Thomas and Jaks sat on the same sofa the two naval officers had occupied. They caught up on family matters over sweet tea. “I’ve finally finished medical school, and I’m doing my residency at Johns Hopkins,” said Thomas. “And Jacob just graduated from the University of Maryland where Sarah is now a sophomore.”

“Congratulations to all of you, Thomas. That’s quite the accomplishment.” He hesitated a moment, then added, “Your father would have been so proud, as I’m sure your mother is.”

“Thank you. I know he would have been, and my mother boasts about it to anyone who will listen,” Thomas said, laughing.

“I now have a son who’s about a year old,” said Jaks with a broad smile.

“Congratulations! That’s wonderful news. You and Lana must be so excited.”

“Thank you. We are.”

Heller’s expression then darkened. Thomas asked, “What’s wrong?”

Heller choked as he said, “My father’s been diagnosed with terminal cancer, and he doesn’t have much time left.”

Thomas held Jaks’ hands firmly and offered, “Our thoughts and prayers are with him, you, and your family, Jaks. I know how much you love him. He’s a good man. I believe...” He paused, and then continued, “No, I *know* our fathers would have liked each other. They were cut from the same cloth.”

Jaks nodded in agreement. Then he asked, “Say, where is your mother?”

Thomas walked over to the fireplace mantel, retrieved an envelope, and handed it to Jaks. “My mother won’t be joining us. And before you ask ...” Thomas said with a smile, “... no, she’s not angry with you. The letter will explain.”

“Do you know what it says?” Jaks asked pensively.

“Yes, I do. Just read the letter, Jaks. You’ll understand.”

After a few moments of silence, Jaks stood. Thomas handed Jaks a separate sheet of paper, saying, “You’ll find my number and address if you ever want to write or call. Of course, I’ll do the same.” They shook hands and gave each other a hug. But both knew this would more than likely be the last time they would be seeing each other for a while, if not forever.

Albert Jackson Heller stopped at a rest area along the interstate. He opened his window, lit a cigarette, and held the letter in his hands for what seemed like an eternity. Finally, he opened the envelope and carefully pulled out the letter. It read:

“Dear Jaks,

Please forgive me for not being there to meet you today. I trust Thomas told you I’m not angry, so please don’t read anything into this letter.

You’re a good man, Albert Jackson Heller. I now fully understand why Whitney was so proud of you and trusted you. I will be forever grateful for your visits to Whitney’s gravesite, as I know he is. Yes, I know about them. But the time has come for both of us to move on. You cannot keep torturing yourself. You must forgive yourself and live your life, as I must. I believe Whitney is at peace, and the best way we can honor his memory is to live our lives as he would have wanted us to. Remember his words: ‘Do the best you can with the right attitude, and whatever happens next is in God’s hands.’ Let God show you the way, as He has for me and my family, and put your trust in His hands. God bless you, Jaks.

With Fondest Regards and Love, Always,

Alma McCrea”

Heller finished two more cigarettes before he neatly folded the letter, and inserted it back into the envelope. He laid it in the middle of the passenger seat. The only thought he had was, *Maybe that’s why my mother never visited, wrote, or called me while I was recuperating. Maybe it would have reminded her of what she went through with my father.* Albert Jackson Heller wanted to believe that. He needed to believe that.

He threw his cigarette out the open window, then raised it. Next, he reached into the glove box to retrieve the one item he always knew would bring him peace.

Heller locked the car door behind him and found a quiet space in the woods behind the rest area. He fell to his knees, and joined his crew.

THE END